

Bruce Nauman: Models

One of the hallmarks of Bruce Nauman's approach is that he has always focused as an artist on what he has found himself faced with directly – the space around him, his own body, and language. Take language to start with: Nauman, like Marcel Duchamp before him, has never shied away from banal jokes and puns, for they often reveal things that are suppressed, in defiance of social convention. The fact that the word DEATH also contains the word EAT is a simple truism, as obvious as it is gruesome. Nauman's chosen medium for insights such as these was commonplace neon signage – illuminated writing which, unlike a picture or a relief, draws attention like a tacky advertisement. In this instance, however, what the neon signage conveys is not just straightforward information, but linguistic ambiguity.

When Nauman engages with elementary phenomena, he does not present the material facts, but explores the intangible that cannot be grasped. Instead of sculptures, he has built experimental environments such as the 1969 Performance Corridor consisting of two wallboards propped up with lathes, forming a narrow corridor that allowed only one person at a time to enter. This confined space restricted and determined the movements of the individuals walking through it, prompting a physical and perhaps even a psychological reaction. For documenta 5 in 1972, Nauman created a narrow space with yellow painted, elliptically curved walls that did not meet at the ends. Entering through a side door, visitors would find themselves in an area where they were closed off from the outside world, yet still able to hear the sounds and see the light of that outside world. The curve of the walls meant that the open ends could not be seen at first, and, because the space narrowed so sharply, they could not be reached. Isolation and frustration, calmness and confusion – the space elicited subjective feelings that were neither predictable nor controllable.

By contrast, a conventional space could be assailed by the power of the subjective imagination, as in the 1969 performance piece for Museum Leverkusen, which required no construction whatsoever. A performer, lying face down on the floor, was instructed to sink into the floor with open eyes and then, having done so, to lie on his back and imagine the floor rising up around him. For Nauman, not only the corridors, but also mind-exercises such as these, took on the character and function of models, which, like the neon signs, did not represent something in their own right, but acted as pointers towards something.

In the early 1970s, Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo invited Nauman to create an outdoor sculpture. For this, he proposed a bowl-shaped underground room accessed through a shaft. Nauman had a very clear idea about this approach, which he outlined in drawings: "The first pieces in this series had to do with shafts that were to go down into the ground about forty feet. You would go down the stairs, circle around the perimeter, the clear sky left visible only through the tops of the shafts."¹ Although the project did not come to fruition, Nauman continued to pursue this theme. It turned out that the imaginary spaces were related to his early corridors, in that the shafts and tunnels evoked a disturbingly constricted situation. His Circle, conceived in 1977 and cast in iron in 1978, represents the first model for an underground tunnel complex that Nauman went on to create on the basis of a drawing. The geometric form does not

rest on the ground, the cast pieces are propped up on small wood blocks. Nauman spoke of a scale somewhere between 1:12 and 1:40, meaning that the actual tunnel would have had a diameter of between 60 and 200 metres. Nauman dismissed such a project: "I decided I wasn't interested in building some of the projects on any scale except that in the model. So, even though these aren't to be built, I still call them models."²

Above all, however, it is the design of the model that fires the imagination, allowing us to envisage the resulting space and what it would mean to be inside that space.

Unwieldy as the dimensions of the model itself might already be, the underground structure, once built, would form an enormous dungeon. The model shows only the outer form, which would not be visible inside the tunnel structure. How would the underground circle look from inside, and how would one feel and act inside it?

One fundamental aspect of the circular tunnel was the cross-section in the shape of an acute triangle; for the second model he had cast – a triangle of the same dimensions – Nauman chose as the cross-section an obtuse-angled triangle. As a third element in this group, exhibited here for the first time together, he has added a square, with a square cross-section. The three differently shaped pieces are visibly built from separate parts and they don't constitute a coherent geometrical sequence; they are individual models. The fourth model, Equilateral Triangle, also created in 1977 and with the same cross-section as Circle, does not have a closed form. It consists of three 5-metre axes in star-shaped alignment, divided at their point of intersection to two parts of differing lengths. On joining the end points together, the lines would form equilateral triangles.

Just how important basic geometric forms are to Nauman is evident in the fact that they can be found, once more, in his 1981 South America Square, South America Triangle and South America Circle, as well as in combination in his three-part, ceiling-suspended work Square, Triangle, Circle of 1984. In Nauman's constructions, circle, triangle and square are divested of the neutrality that is the main appeal in works by, say, Sol LeWitt. As LeWitt wrote in 1967, "The best that can be said for either the square or the cube is that they are relatively uninteresting in themselves" and therefore that "they can be better used as grammatical devices from which the work may proceed."³ Nauman, by contrast, pitches the forms against one another, because he is interested in their different potential psychological effects: "I find triangles really uncomfortable, disconcerting kinds of spaces. There is no comfortable place to stay inside them or outside them. It's not like a circle or square that give you security."⁴

Rather than definitive clarity of status, Nauman seeks to generate contradiction and insecurity, and this is reflected in the different messages the work conveys; "visual and physical information as well as the intellectual information which indicates that the sculpture is only a model. Immediately you begin to imagine what it would be like and how you would respond to it at the proper scale. You have to deal with two orders of information at once, that's what makes it interesting."⁵ His models are not aimed at achieving the perfect geometric form, nor even an autonomous sculptural entity, but instead at occupying the interim space that emerges between reality and imagination, or, indeed generating tension between two conflicting messages. As Nauman puts it:

“It’s like thinking two thoughts at once, or seeing a piece of paper from both sides at once. There is leftover information to deal with.”⁶

The wall piece Model for Room with My Soul Left out, Room That Doesn’t Care is a different matter, for, like so many of Nauman’s works of the 1980s, it is made of everyday materials. The title emphasises that the room in question is no neutral space, but rather, that the room itself is the agent instead of the subject entering it. On the face of things, it is an abstract, cross-like structure; the observer can see inside through the arms of the cross, where there is a figure standing in the intersection of the tunnel shafts, protected by the walls, yet exposed to view. The appearance of this figure can be traced back to a dream that Nauman once had, and which is also the basis for both the versions of his large-scale 1983 work Dream Passage which are related to our work: “It was about being in a long corridor and there was a room at the end of the corridor. The light was a yellow-gray color, dim. There was a figure on the left, unidentified. I had the dream many times and I kind of figured it must be a part of myself I hadn’t identified. It seemed important to objectify myself.”⁷

In seeing images of one’s own body, or parts of it, one’s body appears to oneself as an object. This common experience is reflected in Nauman’s early video works, in which he carried out simple actions, slowly and repetitively. When the footage is screened on the monitor, he does not appear as a person, but as an actor, or objectified figure.

Model for Stadium also addresses this contradiction between seeing and being seen and the altered status it effects. The stepped terracing that serves as seating is deployed as an abstract element and assembled to form a roof-like structure. If spectators were to sit here, they would not be watching an event, but would themselves become the object of observation, while the yellow lighting defines the negative space beneath the abutted sets of steps as the stage or scene of action.

In Nauman’s models for spaces, there is an interaction between subject and representational projection, between private and public sphere. The same applies to his works involving the human body, which seems to be the most obviously close-up and personal object of all, and which is always available as a starting point for the artist’s works. For his bronze cast Henry Moore Bound to Fail Nauman used a photograph of his own back and heightened the illusionary effect of the wall relief by pressing his pullover into the modelled wax. He applied the dual meaning of «bound» as a lever to undermine this illusion and, with that, any assumption of a hidden self-portrait. While it is the artist who appears with his arms bound in this wall piece, it is the hands of the pianist that are symbolically bound in his audio installation For Beginners (Instructed Piano), for the pianist cannot play freely, but has to execute a series of finger exercises according to prescribed instructions.

The hand plays a primary role in Nauman’s oeuvre – but not in the sense of the virtuoso hand of the artist. He uses the hand as the immediately available instrument that carries out his intentions and which is always there, right in front of his eyes, bound to him both inwardly and outwardly, at once part of the subject and its object alike. If the hand is shown on its own, separated from the body, displaying only the movements and intertwining of the fingers, as in his white bronze casts of pairs of hands, then the hand appears as an object; the way the hands turn from the horizontal to the vertical underlines the distance to this familiar body part. The hand with a wine

glass balanced on its back, out of its reach, is alienated from its function as an instrument; and yet, if it moves, the wine will spill.

The drawing that Nauman sketched to outline this idea underpinned the photographic montage for the print series Vino Rosso. The models thus have their starting point in a drawing that encapsulates their characteristics in nuce: quickly sketched, outlining the essential and omitting the unnecessary, allowing words and numbers to explain the image as there is no formal restriction of expression, exploring details that can be enlarged or specified, rendering an idea visible while referencing that which can be envisaged but not portrayed. In principle, the drawing foreshadows the model, as it opens up a further realm of the imagination. Stylistically unbound, with no heed for convention, the drawing, in essence, stands for Nauman's practice of creating models that reach beyond the factual.

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¹ Ian Wallace/Russell Keziere, "Bruce Nauman Interviewed" [1978], in Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words. Writings and Interviews, edited by Janet Kraynak. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2003, p. 187.

² Bruce Nauman, cited by Jennie Lusk in Bruce Nauman: 1/12 Scale Models For Underground Pieces, exh. cat., Albuquerque Museum, Albuquerque, 1981, unpaginated.

³ Sol LeWitt, "The Square and the Cube", in Art in America, vol. 55, no. 4 (July-August 1967), p. 54. Reprinted in Sol LeWitt, A Retrospective, edited by Gary Garrels, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, p. 376.

⁴ Joan Simon, "Breaking the Silence: An Interview with Bruce Nauman" [1987], in Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words. Writings and Interviews, edited by Janet Kraynak. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 2003, p. 332.

⁵ Ian Wallace/Russell Keziere, "Bruce Nauman Interviewed" [1978], see note 1, p. 187.

⁶ Bruce Nauman cited by Jennie Lusk, see note. 2, unpaginated.

⁷ Amei Wallach, "Artist of the Showdown", in Bruce Nauman, edited by Robert C. Morgan. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002 (=Art + Performance), p. 41.